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February 7, 2023 - Committee on Children

SB 929, AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS

Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, and members of the Committee on Children. My name is AnaAlicia Cruz and I am the Executive Director of Nourish My Soul, a food justice nonprofit in Connecticut. Today, I am speaking to **ask for your support for SB 929, An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students.**

I believe that having access to nutritious food is a basic right for every human being. We know this to be true, that is why during the pandemic we made lunches accessible to every student. In the town in which we operate, East Granby, the schools have no school lunch program. They are a small town without the resources to create kitchens and staff for providing lunches to our students. This is a town with no grocery store. If a student comes to school without a lunch, they endure a day of no food and no way of accessing food. Often teachers will notice a student that never has a lunch and will provide snacks that can be stored in a cabinet. This is an added cost to the teacher and can be demoralizing to the student. When Covid hit and lunches were provided to students, East Granby partnered with Granby Public Schools to provide school lunches for the first time to students. During this time, East Granby also saw their numbers rise from 12% of students that qualified for the free and reduced lunches through the Milk Program to over 21%. This is a significant increase that we know will only continue to rise with the inflation happening right now. Without universal school lunches, a minimum of one in five students will be hungry. One in five students will not be able to learn and function at their best simply because they have no access to food. One in five students will likely be unable to compete in after school sports due to lack of food fueling their performance. This is a catastrophic loss to us as a society, and one that we have demonstrated is fully avoidable.

In addition to school lunches, I believe that food and nutrition education should be a mandatory and consistent part of every child's education. If we are going to reverse the health outcomes for future generations, we need better education that focuses on real food - how to grow it and how to prepare it. At Nourish My Soul, we have demonstrated the excitement a child has for real, fresh food when they have had a part in growing and/or preparing it. This is real life learning that will be applicable to their lives forever. The lessons that are taught cross all subject matters; math, science, history, language arts, geography, art, and even SEL. Students that participate in a Farm to School learning not only adopt healthier eating habits and do better in school, but they also become good stewards of the Earth, something we desperately need right now. I encourage you to add funding for continued Farm to School education in SB 929, so that not only are students gaining access to healthy food, but also learning how to continue to provide healthy food for themselves in the future.

Thank you for your consideration and for the time and energy you devote to making our lives better.

With Gratitude,

*AnaAlicia Cruz
Executive Director of Nourish My Soul
East Granby, CT*
